

Please note: Do not include testimonials/letters of support. The nomination should cover accomplishments during the stated period of performance (10/1/02-9/30/03).

I am nominating the following individual/team:

Name: Wendy Thomi

Area of Responsibility: X Superfund Oil

Region: Region 8

Office: Montana Operations

Sanjay Pinnick 1/26/03
John Wadell 1/26/03
Outstanding Achievement (must be funded with SF or Oil \$)

SDMS Document ID



2030857

For the following award (place an X next to the appropriate award):

	On-Scene Coordinator (OSC)
	Remedial Project Manager (RPM)
	Site Assessment Manager (SAM)
X	Community Involvement Coordinator (CIC)
	Leader/Mentor (L/M)
	Superfund Team
	Outstanding Achievement (Please specify area: _____)
	Record of Decision (ROD) of the Year

In the following criteria (you must address at least 4 criteria):

	Project Management Planning
X	Complex Coordination And Negotiation
X	Initiative in Using Innovative Technologies, Techniques, or Processes
X	National Benefit
X	Community Involvement/Outreach
X	Productivity/Efficiency
X	Exceptional Team Efforts
X	Reuse/Revitalization
	Homeland Security

History/Background of the Nominee/Site:

Wendy Thomi has served as the EPA Community Involvement Coordinator (CIC) for the Libby Asbestos Site in Libby, Montana since 1999. The Libby Asbestos Site is one of the most complex and challenging sites the Agency has ever faced. Since emergency response operations began in 1999, Libby has consistently received extensive national attention and media coverage. The stakes at Libby are extremely high: several hundred residents have died as a result of asbestos exposure and over a thousand have been diagnosed with lung abnormalities. No other site presents documented health effects of this magnitude. One cannot enter the grocery store in Libby without seeing someone attached to an oxygen bottle. People continue to die nearly every week from asbestos-related disease.

After cleaning up primary source areas and conducting extensive investigations over the past few years, EPA is now one year into cleaning up residential and commercial properties in Libby. We expect to clean up more than 1200 properties over the next few years, at a rate of approximately 200 per year. The magnitude, pace, and complexity of these cleanups is staggering; approximately 3600 properties were sampled and 180 properties were cleaned up from 2002 to 2003. Despite numerous scientific, engineering, and project management issues, the key to success in Libby is community understanding, trust, and acceptance. The challenges and emotions the site team faces when temporarily relocating hundreds of families some of whom have sick or dying family members, cleaning the interiors and exteriors of homes, cleaning or destroying personal possessions, and explaining the rationale for the cleanup are unprecedented. How do you explain that the "low level" of asbestos in indoor dust that we are not cleaning up is safe for someone's toddler to crawl in? Wendy has risen to the challenge in Libby for several years, but her greatest contributions are those coming to fruition now as we enter the most difficult phase of cleanup.

Complex Coordination and Negotiation:

Because there are so many government agencies, community interests and political sensitivities associated with Libby, Wendy has had to exercise considerable diplomacy and negotiation skills in order to bring everyone together to do what is best for the community. There are factions in the community that are strongly anti-government, the PRP has powerful allies, political representatives have their own agendas, each governmental agency is jealous of its "turf." Wendy has been the point-of-contact for counterparts in various EPA headquarters offices and Region 8, Department of Health and Human Services, and ATSDR's Georgia and Denver offices. She also became the de facto point-of-contact for Montana Departments of Environmental Quality and Public Health and Human Services. She was often the public face of all these agencies in Lincoln County and Libby. All of these groups had different perspectives, roles and needs. Wendy has found a way to bring these very disparate groups together. She also facilitated resolution of the different strongly held points of view within Regional EPA programs and state programs.

Strategizing the delicate process of building support for listing Libby on the NPL fell primarily to Wendy. Bringing governmental agencies and local government together to determine the agenda and goals and to produce the Asbestos and Public Health Conference was Wendy's responsibility. To her fell the difficult task of advocating that EPA do right by this community to EPA headquarters programs that were concerned about broader implications of decisions at Libby. Wendy also treads the delicate line necessary to respond equally to those in the community who resist the presence of a federal agency in their community and to those who want EPA to solve all the community's problems. It is a tribute to her success that she is highly regarded by all these interests.

Initiative in Using Innovative Technologies, Techniques, or Processes:

Wendy has approached community involvement at Libby in an innovative way both by employing rarely used outreach techniques and by using familiar community involvement tools in an innovative way. She recognized immediately that the community involvement and communication needs in Libby would be extensive. As initial investigations began, Wendy worked with the On-Scene Coordinator to establish a full-time Information Center in Libby staffed by a contractor. Some questioned the need for such a service, but Wendy insisted. It is doubtful that even those who supported the concept of a full time EPA Information Center knew how valuable this resource would become. Four years later, the EPA Information Center is one of the most vital parts of the community involvement program in Libby. Its value has increased as the residential cleanup geared up. Coached by Wendy, the center's full time staffer has become a well-known and trusted face in the community. Dozens of residents visit the EPA Information Center weekly and many call every day, some just to vent. The Center makes available technical and non-technical documents, audio and video tapes, meeting space, and examples of the vermiculite that came out of the mine in its many forms. Most visitors leave with the answers for which they were looking. This type of immediate response and on-site presence is crucial to keeping Libby residents informed and comfortable when so much environmental work is taking place in their community.

Wendy also quickly instituted weekly "Q&As" in the local newspapers to answer common questions in the community and to respond to emerging issues and concerns before they became a source of conflict with EPA. It is worth noting that the Q&As were Wendy's answer to resident's request for weekly fact sheets. Realizing that she wouldn't be able to compose and distribute a new fact sheet each week, she suggested publishing the Q&As. Community members often suggest questions they know people around town are asking or wondering about. Rather than formal public notices such as those used for RODs, the Q&As are written in simple, easy to read language. By addressing lingering questions or "hot issues" with Q&As, the Site Team keeps rumors to a minimum and ensures EPA's response is quickly available to the public. Communication is constant, not sporadic. This requires extensive work by Wendy, but the benefits are tangible. We hear people quote Q&As to each other and they often thank us for writing them. The team is confident that issues that would have turned into stumbling blocks are addressed openly in a timely manner thereby lowering anxiety and precluding protracted discussions.

Wendy puts existing community involvement tools to innovative use. A rift was developing between site workers faced with the stress of relocating residents and, in some cases, literally gutting homes, and Libby residents who were anxious about health risks and the impact the cleanup had on their homes. Wendy saw the need to move quickly to bridge the widening gap. She used a Risk Communication workshop, which is normally used just to train EPA staff to explain the risk assessment process and to improve staff communication about site risks, as a forum in which site workers and residents listened to each other as they explained their concerns and fears. This workshop began the process of joint understanding and healing the hurt feelings on both sides.

Because of the incredibly negative effect cigarette smoking has on those suffering from asbestos-related lung disease, Wendy worked with ATSDR and EPA headquarters to craft outreach materials - brochures and public service announcements - to build community awareness of these negative impacts. This activity went well beyond what would normally be considered the responsibility of the site community involvement coordinator but met a critical public health awareness need in this community.

National Benefit:

The impact of Libby on the rest of the country is profound. In areas of asbestos analysis, risk assessment, and risk communication, information we have gained in Libby is helping EPA rethink how to regulate asbestos and communicate its dangers. Decisions made in Libby, such as EPA's decision to remove vermiculite insulation, have had direct national implications. The Libby Site Team, especially Wendy, has authored numerous press releases, newspaper articles, brochures and fact sheets. She also participated in the development of the national warning regarding vermiculite insulation.

Asbestos sampling protocols and cleanup decisions at Libby are precedent-setting and have major implications for broader EPA policies and visa versa. For example, Libby residents were upset when EPA decided not to declare a public health emergency in Libby as a justification for aggressive removal of asbestos-containing vermiculite. While another justification was used, it seemed like bureaucratic hair-splitting in the face of a real tragedy in this community. It fell to Wendy and the site team to try to soften this perception in the community.

She also was the first to see the importance of providing residents traumatized by an overwhelming environmental health threat with crisis stress counseling and worked both within EPA and externally to bring that help to the community. The stress counseling lessons learned at Libby were put to use when EPA responded to the World Trade Center disaster.

Libby also serves as a model for how EPA can change initial negative public reactions to productive collaborative relationships *despite* numerous handicaps – past history, lack of firm answers, and funding challenges just to name a few. This turnaround was possible only because of the intense community involvement efforts conducted by Wendy and the site team over the past several years. A potential black eye, Libby has instead become a chance for EPA to shine. Wendy will again share her experiences and lessons learned in the coming year at the National Community Involvement Conference and other venues.

Community Involvement/Outreach:

Wendy immediately recognized that Libby would present unique community involvement challenges. Located in far northwestern Montana, in a region traditionally suspicious of the federal government, EPA staff had their work cut out for them from the beginning. Libby residents felt betrayed by EPA because the Agency previously had missed opportunities to address the asbestos problem. The community believed EPA's inaction had resulted in continued exposures and deaths. The responsible party, W.R. Grace, still denied there was a problem. Showing the townspeople that the EPA site team was trustworthy and would listen and respond to their concerns was a top priority from the beginning. In addition to countless one-on-one interactions, personal visits, and conversations, Wendy envisioned and was instrumental in developing numerous community involvement tools and programs that enabled investigation and cleanup to proceed. These tools allowed the on-scene coordinators and remedial project managers to work in a climate that showed openness and fostered trust. Wendy's approach enabled the community to empower itself and begin to control its own destiny.

EPA Store-Front Information Center and Weekly Q & A's: As referenced above, Wendy saw the need for the community to have easy, daily access to EPA so they could get their concerns addressed quickly. She also recognized that it was imperative to respond to issues as they emerged rather than waiting until they became crises. She worked with the OSC to establish the EPA storefront office and instituted a weekly "Q & A" feature in the local newspapers to address emerging questions in the community.

Community Advisory Group (CAG): Wendy was proactive in working with residents to shape the Libby Community Advisory Group. The CAG became the voice of asbestos victims who had been ignored for years. While the group has been an emotional forum at times, allowing people to vent about issues that are important to them, it has undeniably been a productive arena for community involvement. The CAG provided a setting for discussions of difficult and emotional issues such as health screening, treatment for asbestos exposure, cleanup decisions and economic development. On many occasions the CAG collectively set a goal and took action to achieve it. They wrote letters, made calls, and lobbied local, state and national elected officials. The group's efforts influenced decisions about listing Libby on the National Priority List, shaped decisions on whether to and how to clean up homes and businesses, and secured funding and services to provide needed health care to Libby residents. Rather than dictating an agenda for the CAG, Wendy encouraged members to take ownership of their group and to tailor its function to meet their needs. Wendy provided the group with options and enabled them to select a neutral facilitator from outside Libby to help run the meetings. A solid core of 20 people with diverse interests continue to participate in meetings as members, and a dedicated "audience" of 30-50 people continues to attend every meeting since the group's inception.

Conferences and Workshops: Wendy conceptualized and planned a three-day conference on Asbestos and Public Health that helped get up-to-date information to Libby residents on the complex issues of asbestos and public health. A side benefit to this conference was that it brought many people from across the country to Libby to attend and present at the conference. These visitors also boosted the struggling local economy. The planning committee included Libby residents, federal, state and local officials.

As residential cleanup began this year, it became clear that extraordinary communication efforts with the community would be required for the EPA site team and their oversight contractors many of whom were young and inexperienced at working in such an emotionally-charged environment. The newly formed Technical Assistance Group (TAG) was tackling difficult technical issues and residents were apprehensive both about their health and the impacts of the cleanups on their lives. Wendy worked with the Remedial Project Manager to plan and conduct a one-day Risk Communication Workshop for the EPA team, contractors, the TAG and community members. The training went incredibly well. Tears were shed. Negative perceptions, both of the EPA team and of the community were changed. Since the workshop the working relationship with the TAG and the community has improved. Wendy is planning a follow-up workshop.

Field CIC and Cleanup Video: Wendy also took on the job of refining EPA's on-the-ground process for getting information to residents whose homes were undergoing cleanup. At any given time, the Libby field team is dealing with up to 40 residents - those facing cleanup, those undergoing cleanup, and those whose cleanup was recently completed. Despite the team's best efforts initially, it was clear that they needed additional help to ensure these interactions were as efficient and productive as possible. There was just too much going on. Wendy knew she couldn't be on-site at all times so she worked with the RPM and the contractors to bring in and train full-time "field" outreach specialists. These outreach contractors serve as the day-to-day point of contact for residents on all questions and issues. They are trained and empowered to make many decisions. It is rare to devote so many resources to direct communication with residents, but this was critical in Libby. Questionnaires and surveys completed by residents after cleanup have indicated strong support, reliance, and appreciation for such personal attention. Nearly 95% of those responding to the survey indicated "very good" and "good" impressions of the cleanup process and results. This high level of acceptance is directly attributable to the personal attention each resident receives despite the enormous scope of the cleanup EPA is conducting.

It was also clear that many aspects of the cleanup were confusing to residents. To ensure that residents had reasonable expectations and fully understood the cleanup process, Wendy spearheaded the development and production of a short video to be shown to residents prior to cleanup of their homes. The video is an accurate and realistic visual representation of the entire cleanup process that can be shown in a resident's home on a laptop computer. Using the "picture is worth a thousand words" strategy, the video succinctly describes the cleanup process, from investigation to completion. It contains testimonials, and cautions, from other residents who have experienced the cleanup. This video, along with other written materials, will be used at pre-cleanup meetings with residents for years to come. The video is another example of going above and beyond to ensure that communication with residents is clear and that Libby residents understand the investigation and cleanup process.

Productivity/Efficiency:

Region 8 has invested many resources in community involvement for Libby. The cost of the EPA Information Center, the field outreach specialists, and other community involvement efforts is in excess of \$200,000 per year. However, each of these investments has direct impacts on the efficiency and effectiveness of the investigation and cleanup. Most importantly, because Wendy has designed and implemented an effective community involvement effort, project managers are now free to manage, rather than constantly arbitrating conflicts with residents or being drawn away from site work to defend EPA. Conflicts with residents are minimized and are addressed almost exclusively by Wendy, allowing the cleanup process to continue and keeping the overall schedule unaffected. This impact is difficult to quantify overall, but it is profound - just one day of delay can amount to tens of thousands of dollars in personnel, equipment, and relocation costs. The proactive community involvement program Wendy has instituted has also been instrumental in allowing the site team to accomplish so much in so little time. One could simply not sample 3600 properties in one year without outstanding communication, information dissemination and community acceptance.

Exceptional Team Efforts:

Wendy has been a team player on many levels, providing support to the technical and legal staff at EPA and to the construction and oversight contractors when necessary. Wendy is the team's eyes and ears. The information that the community wants to receive and needs in order to be integrally involved in the decision-making process is overwhelming in its complexity and sheer volume. Wendy strives to keep up with the technical, legal and on-site details of the investigation and cleanup so she can communicate it in simple language to the community. She maintains relationships with individuals and groups within the community and constantly looks for ways to broaden the network in order to convey the abundant information to as many people as possible. She uses her community contacts to identify emerging issues and help the site team respond to them. As the representative of

EPA, Wendy is a member and regular attendee of several diverse groups in Libby, including the "Healthy Communities Initiative (an economic redevelopment group) and the Center for Asbestos-Related Disease Board. She assists many groups with research and assistance for Federal grants. This active involvement on a local scale continually demonstrates EPA's commitment to Libby. Wendy is respected and liked among internal and external team members as well as the Libby residents with whom she works.

Reuse/Revitalization:

Lincoln County, where Libby is located, has the highest unemployment rate in Montana, one of the country's poorest states. In recent years, Libby has lost all its major employers, including the W.R. Grace vermiculite operation, the Stimson Lumber Mill, and the Troy Mine. Population has decreased and unemployment has skyrocketed. Like many former company towns, Libby is now faced with an uncertain future, one made even more difficult by the national notoriety Libby has gained *and* the personal health care costs associated with asbestos-related disease and death. Again, Wendy has worked proactively to address these issues in a number of ways.

One approach to revitalization is through the use of Superfund's redevelopment program. While there is no obvious or classic "reuse" property in Libby, the Libby Site Team has still taken the initiative to assist local government and businesses with issues of economic development. Earlier this year, EPA funded an economic development workshop, entitled "Dream It, Do It" that Wendy designed and facilitated. This two day event was conceived and brought to fruition in a period of only three months. Local business leaders and residents were encouraged to use the workshop and EPA's resources to address issues of concern to them - not to EPA. They have. The results have been tangible and contagious--an on-going community work group composed of elected officials, businesspeople and concerned citizens that will pursue economic development over the next several years. The idea to engage local business leaders, who were inclined to oppose asbestos cleanup because it was feared to stigmatize their community, was first met with skepticism by asbestos victims. However, this effort to bring all facets of the community at the table is beginning to bridge the gap that exists in Libby between those whose primary concern is asbestos cleanup and those who have other concerns. Wendy understands that only when these interests come closer together can Libby move forward successfully. She also recognizes that for an effort to be sustained it must be community-driven and broad based, not EPA-led.